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ABSTRACT

One problem with the outcome-based measures used in higher education is that they measure quantity but not quality. Benchmarking, or the use of some external standard of quality to measure tasks, processes, and outputs, is partially solving that difficulty. Benchmarking allows for the establishment of a systematic process to indicate if outputs are of quality, and even for organizations to develop their own definitions of "quality." It is typically used in strategic planning, in forecasting the organization's future, and in improving processes within the organization. Internal benchmarking compares similar activities performed by different departments in the same organization. Functional benchmarking compares one organization's processes to those of another organization deemed the leader in that same area. Generic benchmarking involves examining the best practices in areas that cross industry lines, like document processing or building maintenance. Finally, competitive benchmarking is looking at one's own performance in an area and comparing it to a competitor's. Usually it is services or products that are benchmarked, but internal work processes and support functions can also be measured this way. In the actual measuring process, pre-benchmarking means deciding what to measure and how, benchmarking involves gathering data and measuring outputs, and post-benchmarking includes analyzing the data and formulating future goals. The review/renew phase leads back to the beginning of the process as goals are reset. Sources of institutional data available for comparison, as well as sources offering guidance on the benchmarking process itself, are listed. (Author/BEW)

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BENCHMARKING: A PROCESS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The total quality movement, and/or the continuous quality improvement movement, is popular today by any name. The higher education literature is awash with instructive guidance for the professional administrator including what every organization must know and do to survive into the next century. Higher education is becoming very competitive. Cost containment combined with the desire to better serve the customer are the two primary reasons for the interest in the quality movement.

Higher education is becoming interested in defining quality services, in identifying customers, and in the measurement of inputs and outputs. Outcome based measures are in vogue. Libraries in higher education can easily measure outcomes: statistics on the number of users exiting in a set time, the number of reference/directional questions answered, the number of online searchers completed, the number of books cataloged during a prescribed time, etc. There is no end to the number of "output" measures that can come from a library, given enough time and thought.

One problem with these measures is that, while they do measure quantity, there is a corresponding lack of quality measurement, due partially to the trouble with quantifying quality. The question of whether the output measures being counted are the measures which should be counted and are the right things being done remains to be answered.

There is little doubt that libraries see themselves as service organizations, that "users" or "patrons" are now viewed as customers, that libraries wish to improve services through the use of standards and measurements of quality, and that libraries wish to engage in an assessment of continuous improvement. This article is an attempt to define and measure quality improvement through benchmarking.

BENCHMARKING

The term "benchmarking" derives from carpenters and surveyors jargon. A mark on a bench or pole became the standard or measure for future repetitions of a service or task. The "benchmark" was accepted as an indicator that some prior measure was true, acceptable, reliable and could be counted on to provide an indicator of a prior quality measurement. Brought to modern context, benchmarking is a process of measurement using some external standard of quality to measure internal and external tasks, processes and outputs. Benchmarking can be viewed as a journey of continuous improvement, a systematic search for new ideas, new methods, and new measurements aimed at improving the quality of the product, or outputs of the organization.

WHY BENCHMARK?

The main reason to study processes and/or product, whether internal or external, is to determine if they to measure up to some definition of quality. Simply put, are they good enough, how do you know they are good enough, and how can they be improved? Benchmarking allows for the establishment of a systematic process to indicate if the outputs are of quality. It also allows for an organization

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to create its own definition of "quality" for any process/output. Putting all output measures of an organization into a plan, and agreeing on priorities, is a form of "strategic planning," another reason for benchmarking. The quality improvement movement uses benchmarking as one method of determining continuous improvement.

Benchmarking is also used to forecast the organization's future and to develop new ideas to improve processes within the organization. Comparing methods of producing the same product is the best way to improve an internal process. Process comparisons lead to improvement, the goal of benchmarking.

TYPES OF BENCHMARKING

There are four types of benchmarking found in the literature. All four have relevance for higher education and applicability to academic libraries.

- Internal benchmarking is the measurement of similar activities performed by different departments within the same organization. Some examples in libraries are the circulation services, the reference services and the database search functions of branch libraries or departments.

- Functional benchmarking is comparing functions/practices with the best practices from a leader in the same service or industry. Fund-raising, interlibrary loan procedures and recruiting practices are three functions that come to mind in this area. Determining the "best in the field" will be discussed later.

- Generic benchmarking is comparing the best practice of a function or process which crosses industry or service lines such as term billing, document processing, or facility maintenance practices.

- Finally, competitive benchmarking is the comparison of one's own performance in a process or service with that of a competitor in the same industry. Recruiting practices, grant administration, and public relations activities are areas where competitive benchmarking might prove profitable in higher education.

WHAT TO BENCHMARK

Benchmarking is an ongoing activity to seek improvement. The question is where to seek this improvement. Realistically, anything that is a process or product can be measured and potentially improved by systematic study. The most obvious candidate for benchmarking is the services or products of an organization. Usually these are "outputs," or products which users, or customers, receive as the result of a encounter with the organization. However, internal work processes may also be measured and improved, and therefore are candidates for benchmarking. All organizations have both internal and external customers. Internal support functions, performed primarily to enhance an external output, are also measurable. Finally, and not the least important, overall organizational performance and strategy can be benchmarked.

BENCHMARKING PROCESS

The literature lists four or five steps in the process of benchmarking, depending on whether you wish to begin with introspection as the initial step. "Above all else, know thyself," wrote Shakespeare. To understand benchmarking it is quite necessary to know the organization, its

internal and external customers, and the products or goals of the organization. The steps that follow are:

- Pre-Benchmarking: Deciding what is to be measured; how to measure; and what partners or criterion will be used in the process.

- Benchmarking: During this stage the process of gathering data, measuring outputs and estimating targets is formulated. This lengthy process involves many staff and much organization time.

- Post-Benchmarking: The results are in; the process of analysis is started and the future goals are formulated. An action plan, a strategy, is created and set in motion.

- Review/Renew: Providing feedback for future decisions is important in this phase. During this phase review of the strategy, resetting goals and continuous planning for improvement lead back to the first step of pre-benchmarking.

BENCHMARKING MODEL REQUIREMENTS

The process of benchmarking will be repetitive once it is put into practice in an organization. As such the model must contain a series of simple, logical sequences of activities which need minimal monitoring but which can be readily altered as the requirements change. The process will be more successful with a heavy prior emphasis on planning, organization, and reporting of results. Prior consideration of the use of the results and of the continuing process will lead to a simple, generic process of continuous self-measurement for improvement.

SELECTING PARTNERS

Benchmarking is a continuous process of introspection which is validated by comparing data gathered from other institutions. It requires the library to select a partner or a set of partners who are either the "best" in a particular output or a group of libraries accepted as peers. Choosing the "best" is subjective, at best. The goal is to become the best and to have elated, not merely satisfied customers. Some sources for teams are:

- The Institutional Research Office at your institution.

- The NACUBO Benchmarking data, if available.

- The national library grouping of your choice.

- The Statistical Norms for College and University Libraries from the U.S. Department of Education Surveys.

- The Higher Education Price Indexes Annual.

- A self-prepared questionnaire prepared to determine partner relationships.

- University/College libraries which have a regional/national reputation for excellence in an area you wish to benchmark.

SUMMARY

Benchmarking is much more than merely gathering comparative statistics for the record. It requires clear, distinct steps, careful analysis and an understanding of the necessity for continuity of effort. The data, along with the results of a thoughtfully prepared site visit, are the key

factors in completing an initial cycle of benchmarking, a step leading to improvement.

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The following books were invaluable in the preparation of this article. I borrowed freely from the ideas presented throughout the texts. They are necessary reading if one desires to search beyond the surface of benchmarking.

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